

**Book 3 of the  
Alone Forever  
Trilogy**

# **ALONE FOREVER AT THE END OF THE WORLD**



**Barry Manalone**

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Alone Forever  
At The End Of The World

by

Barry Manalone

THE  
ALONE FOREVER  
TRILOGY

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How To Be Alone Forever (2018)

Being Yourself Alone Forever (2019)

Alone Forever At The End Of The World (2020)

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Better never than late.

*Motto of the Alone Forever*

## **INTRODUCTION**

**Q:** Is this book really the last one in the trilogy?

**Barry Manalone:** Yes.

**Q:** The final, *final* one?

There's not going to be another one, ever?

After this, you're gone for good?

**Barry Manalone:** In the order asked: yes, no, yes.

**Q:** What's with the new author name? Why do you keep changing it from book to book?

**Barry Manalone:** I could invent some deep literary reason for using three different pen-names across the three books (Anonymous, Maximus Solo, Barry Manalone), but the truth is that there isn't a deep reason. I just like doing it. It feels right.

**Q:** So what's this one all about, then?

**Barry Manalone:** Like the first two, it's a mishmash of different things. It's partly about tying up some loose ends. It's also partly a response to some younger readers' questions about what it's really, *really* like being a middle-aged Alone Forever person. Specifically, in my case, a 50-something Alone Forever man.

How do I think I got to be this person?

What are my key memories of being 'out there' in the world, trying to be a person among people, as a young man?

What kind of teenage years did I have?

Would I do anything differently?

Questions like that.

Many readers of the first two books are intrigued by my philosophy of Alone Forever. But many are just as curious about my would-be-lofty vantage point. They want to know whether I've always had such a supposedly detached way of seeing things.

**Q:** And you haven't always?

**Barry Manalone:** Nope. Absolutely not! I've got my own bleak Alone Forever history. Just as strange and bitter a history as anyone else's. Some of it is recounted in this book.

I'm most pleased with the first section after this one, entitled *Waiting For Girlfriend*. In it I recount a key episode from my early 20s when I met a young woman who seemed absolutely perfect for me, and for whom I developed the classic doomed Alone Forever fixation. Most of us have such episodes in our lives, and they all leave a bitterbitter aftertaste.

**Q:** Don't you mean bittersweet?

**Barry Manalone:** No, I mean bitterbitter.

**Q:** Okay. So the title... *Alone Forever At The End Of The World*. What does that relate to?

**Barry Manalone:** To the year 2020! *Duh*, as I believe 'they' still say.

Back at the start of this year I had a whole different sort of book ready to be edited and put out.

Then all the madness happened. Covid-19.

I feel a great weariness just *typing* Covid-19. Holy shit, did people do a lot of mewling and puking about having to stay inside for a while, or what? If they

knew a fraction of what our lives are like...

In March, at the start of the crisis, it seemed for a while that the world was going to teeter and topple. I started to journal about the experience of finally facing the apparent end of the world, and how it affected me as an Alone Forever person. An edited version of my journal for that memorable month of March 2020 is in this book.

**Q:** It's not a very long book, is it?

**Barry Manalone:** No, it isn't. It's deliberately a short one. I originally had a 60,000-word whopper of a draft lined up for the series finale. The final version comes in at about 14,000 words.

And that's it for me and the Alone Forever Trilogy.

**Q:** And you're releasing it at the most wonderful time of the year...

**Barry Manalone:** Yes. I am. Happy Christmas. Although I ran into formatting problems, thanks to the section that's in the form of a screenplay, so it's actually coming out on New Year's Eve.

**Q:** Doing anything special?

# WAITING FOR GIRLFRIEND

The year is 1992. I am 24 years old, a stocky young man with a full head of dark hair and a Kirk Douglas dimple in my chin. I might be the type of young man that young women might admire. But there is something different about me. I have never had a girlfriend, and it is starting to become a thing.

I work at a mortgage company. I am a member of a team responsible for data collection and analysis. It is much less exciting than it sounds.

In this hot summer of 1992, my employer sends me and some colleagues on a three-week development course at a nearby conference centre. We are being groomed for greater things. Also present on the course are ten-or-so employees from other branches around the region.

The morning of Day 1 sees the traditional awkward introductions. We go around the room, speaking in turn. One of the others is an attractive young woman named Julia. She wears glasses and her jet-black hair is tied up in a ponytail. She has the librarian/student sort of look that I seem to like best. I stare at her in those first few days, my mind filling with familiar dreams. I look away quickly when she seems about to catch me.

She must not catch me looking. By this stage of my life, I have understood that the majority of women I meet are somewhat put off by my strange manner. Women are often amused by my flashes of quick-wittedness, to be sure, and sometimes they're even interested in the serious things I have to say. But the next level *up* – the romantic-sexual level – is always mysteriously barred to me. I have not yet crossed that barrier with any woman. In 1992, perhaps mercifully, I have no inkling that I never will.

\*

A few days into the training course, people are more familiar with each other. A loose-knit group of friends forms among the attendees. To my surprise, I am a member of this group. At the end of the first week we all head to the nearby pub for an impromptu drunken evening. The group doesn't seem to mind me. In fact they seem to actively enjoy me, and I enjoy their enjoyment of me.

Julia is part of the group. I am able to speak to her in a true social setting. We have a similar outlook on things, similar interests. Like me, she is a keen reader (not so unusual in 1992). We talk about books, impressing one another with our tastes. She mentions with regret that her boyfriend doesn't read much. It's the first mention that there is a boyfriend, but I was expecting it and my poker face is excellent. There is always a boyfriend.

After the second week of the training course, everyone has grown chummy enough that a few people invite their significant others to meet up with us at the pub on Friday.

And thus I get to meet Julia's boyfriend, Steve, who is the usual sort of solid bloke. Steve and I knock back sneaky shots of Jack Daniel's at the bar together. Steve and Julia and me all get along well.

Julia dominates my thoughts. She has become all that I think about. There is effectively no job at the mortgage company, no training course, no little group of temporary friends. They are all merely the context that Julia exists in.

\*

The final week of the training course dawns. It will soon be time for our group to break apart.

Nobody has said anything, but there is an unspoken understanding. At the end of this week, everyone is going to go their separate ways and that will be that.

We have had a great time together, we all agree. It's been truly memorable. Let's do something for the last Friday night! How about something *special*? Somebody suggests a meal at a restaurant. Somebody else suggests going to see a play at the local theatre, followed by a good old pub crawl – and this is the option we all go for. None of us are theatre-goers. It'll be something different.

The play is actually Julia's suggestion. My interest levels in her increase, if that were even possible.

We choose a production of *Waiting For Godot* that is on at the city's main theatre. Two moderately famous comedians from TV are playing the lead roles. I have heard of the play. Of course I have. My whole identity is shaped around the love of books and I consider myself to be a writer, even though I rarely do any writing.

I wonder... What might happen if I tell Julia that I am a writer?

Might she dump her incidental Steve, and come over to me?

Romance with Julia? Me, and Julia?

It's not unthinkable. Julia and I have much in common. There's definitely some kind of attraction there from her side, I think, unless I'm imagining it.

Am I imagining it? I might be imagining it.

But I also might not be imagining it, and therein lies the potential tragedy of the situation. What if I persuade myself that I'm imagining it, when I'm not imagining it? Wouldn't that be a tragedy of the highest order?

\*

The last Friday of the course arrives. In my heart I already know that today is the last I will ever see Julia. But there is always the chance of a wild miracle, so here I am.

*Waiting For Godot* is sold out. Six of us from the training course are attending the play, plus a few partners. Our seats are all together in the same row. I am seated on the outside. Steve is next to me, Julia is next to him on the

other side, and all the others are on her other side. The house lights go down. From the corner of my eye I see Julia take one of Steve's hands in both of hers.

I turn my attention to the play. Why the hell not.

\*

*Waiting For Godot* starts off somewhat peculiarly. It's distracting at first to see two famous TV comedians in the flesh, standing just a few yards away. Then the play takes hold of my imagination. I had no real idea what to expect. When I said I'd heard of *Waiting For Godot*, I really only knew of its basic existence. What it's actually *about* comes as a wonderful surprise.

*Waiting For Godot* is about two peculiar characters who are waiting for somebody or something called Godot, who (spoiler alert) never arrives. It's slow-moving, frustrating, tantalising and funny. Despite everything that happens, nothing ever really happens. The play speaks directly to me.

Interval. We head out to the bar for drinks. A chattering hubbub of voices. What are people saying? Everyone is venting their anger. Everyone is truly disgusted about *Waiting For Godot*. Almost everyone in our group is saying they're not going back after the interval. Steve, solid, regular, dependable bloke Steve, is the most disgusted of all. He can't *believe* he got dragged to this garbage tonight. If Julia thinks he's going back in there to see the rest of it... The others are of the same opinion. None of them are going back to see the second half either. They're all going to sit out here in the bar and get started on getting drunk. Those of us who are crazy enough to enjoy something as boring and stupid as this *Waiting For Godot* crap can go back for more punishment.

It's Julia and me. We are the ones. We are the only two going back.

'Come on, then!' she says in a mock-brisk fashion. She takes my arm and mock-marches me into the auditorium. I give the others a mock-panicked look over my shoulder. They all laugh. Steve laughs too, in a watchful sort of way.

Julia and I seat ourselves side-by-side in the now-empty row of seats. Our

elbows and upper arms are touching.

About a third of the audience has not returned for the second part of *Waiting For Godot*. I will later learn that this is quite normal for productions of this play.

For Julia and me, it is an unforgivable scandal. We whisper about how awful people are. Our heads almost touching.

The house lights dim, and the play comes back to life on the stage.

Julia does not take my hand as she took Steve's, but she is... just *there*. Next to me. Sitting right there, next to me.

The two famous comedians from TV are back in their places, declaiming their lines, but I miss a good chunk of the performance now.

I am distracted.

I cannot stop thinking about the young woman next to me. I cannot stop thinking that there *is* a young woman next to me.

I am sitting in a darkened theatre, before a lit stage. A young man beside a young woman.

And I have this sudden, powerful, overwhelming sense of the road not taken. I am seated beside an attractive young woman who doesn't seem to dislike me, who actually thinks the things I talk about are interesting, and that the jokes I make are funny (some, anyway). This scene, this context, a young man and young woman sitting together at a public event, is a banal, everyday scene for most people. For me, it is a wholly singular event, something that has only come about through a fluke chain of circumstances. It is something that will never be repeated as long as I live.

The play ends. Those of us who remained until the end applaud over-enthusiastically, trying to make up for the absentees. We get it. We understand.

Julia and I emerge into the bar, almost arm-in-arm but not quite, both of us gushing about the genius of Samuel Beckett, both of us praising the actors' performances. The TV comedians who played Vladimir and Estragon are really superb actors! What about that moment in the second half of the play when you understand that Godot is never going to come! And they're all going to *stay* like

that, doing the same things, *forever*. Waiting, and waiting, and waiting, to no end, for *nothing*...

Julia's eyes are shining. She is still 'kind of' on my arm while not literally being so. The way the others are looking at us right now, as if we are the ones on stage, I have an impression of what it must feel like to be one half of a romantic couple. We jointly mock-lecture the group about what a masterpiece they just missed. Steve pretends to hang himself with an invisible rope. Julia mock-scolds him. She seats herself beside him, they casually link arms, and Steve gives her a kiss on the temple.

I don't miss a beat. A fairytale castle has just crumbled to nothing under my feet in a single instant. But I don't miss a single beat of my jokey presentation to the others about the magnificent play they missed.

That's it, then. All over.

I had a glimpse of what life could be, but there is to be nothing else. Julia is not going to be mine, nor I hers.

Julia and Steve are an established couple. A pretty solid couple, too, by the looks of things. I'm just a random dude she encountered on a work training course. After tonight, she'll never see me again.

And none of us ever do see each other again. A few people swap their landline phone numbers, but this is pure social theatre in 1992. Keeping in touch with random people that you barely know isn't something that can happen yet.

I get home after a long trip on the last bus, accompanied by a colleague from my branch. My colleague teases a confession from me. Yes, I admit, I developed a 'crush' on Julia over the past three weeks. We have a good laugh about it all and say goodnight. At home I lay on the sofa and fall asleep, and when I wake up it's the year 2020 and I am 52 years old.

## **ALONE FOREVER:** **THE MOTION PICTURE**

FADE IN:

THE YOUNG MAN'S BEDROOM. INT. DAY.

On the bed is **The Young Man**. He is reading a book. Our view pans across a shabby green carpet, scattered clothes, empty cigarette packs, and many books. An empty Jack Daniel's bottle on its side. There is a bedside table with a ringbound notebook and pen.

Caption: 1990

BARRY  
MANALONE  
(V.O.)

*Y'know, when I was 22, I assumed everything would 'work out'. I believed that eventually, somehow, I would magically acquire a love life of my own, a circle of friends, a future. I believed everything would be... transformed.*

The view swings up and over the bed, looking down at The Young Man. Cigarette in one hand, book in the other.

BARRY  
MANALONE  
(V.O.)

*There he is. He thinks all of this is temporary. He has no idea at all of his strange destiny that grows with every passing day. I sometimes wish I could warn him – my past self...*

There is a shimmer and a glow. A TIME MACHINE materialises in the room. It is a Victorian-style TIME MACHINE in the classic

H.G. Wells vein. It just about fits in the room.

52-year-old **BARRY MANALONE** sits at the controls. He climbs out.

BARRY  
MANALONE

Hello there.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Who the hell are you?

BARRY  
MANALONE

I'm *you*. I'm *you*, from the future. You have seen and read *lots* of fictional versions of meeting your future self. Please don't pretend to be slow-witted. This won't ever be on TV, so we don't have to bother explaining things to the general viewer.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

You're *me*? From the future?

BARRY  
MANALONE

How often have you wondered what yourself from the future would tell you, if he came back to see you? Well, here I am.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

What year have you come from?

BARRY  
MANALONE

2020.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

What, the year *two thousand and twenty*?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Thats right. 30 long years from now.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Wow! What's the world like in 2020?

BARRY  
MANALONE

It's... interesting.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Why did you say that in such an ominous  
way?

BARRY  
MANALONE

I can't tell you. The timeline must be  
preserved. You know the drill.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

You're bald?

(The Young Man puts both hands on his luxuriously thick, shaggy hair.)

I'm going to go *bald*?

BARRY  
MANALONE

'Fraid so. Pretty soon people are going to  
start squinting at your head and saying  
“hey... are you losing your hair?”

THE YOUNG  
MAN

I'm going to go bald. *Shit.*

BARRY  
MANALONE

Bald before you're thirty. And that's just the tip of the shitberg.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

You're in your 50s? You don't look that old. You haven't got any wrinkles that I can see.

BARRY  
MANALONE

Easy when you never have any relationship problems. Easy when you never miss a single wink of sleep over a crying baby.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

No children? That's bad news. I think. *Is* that bad news?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Maybe. Sometimes you'll feel happy about not ever having the chance to have children. And sometimes you'll think that being a father might have been the greatest thing you could ever have been. It will often feel hard to decide what's good or bad about your life. No children. No wife. No friends. Nothing. This is the brutal truth of your future. You're thinking about where and what you want to be by the age of 30. Aren't you?

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Yes.

BARRY  
MANALONE

Well... You won't be anywhere or anything when you turn 30. You'll spend most of your 30th birthday on that very bed, *reading*. You'll get to 30 and you still won't ever have had a girlfriend. Or any sex. Then you'll get to 40, and you *still* won't ever have had a girlfriend. Or any sex. And you'll get to 50... I hope you see where I'm going with this.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Holy shit. *How* old are you exactly?

BARRY  
MANALONE

52. I – you – we – are 52 years old.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

And *I* somehow manage to survive until I'm *you*... alone?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Yes.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Did you say I won't even have friends? How does that happen?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Pretty easily. And *soon*. You only really have, what, two friends now? You've already more or less lost touch with Kevin, haven't you?

The Young Man nods reluctantly.

BARRY  
MANALONE

You'll lose touch with Steve next, and that will be that. You only ever really had those two friends, and you only made friends with them because you happened to sit next to them at school a few times. But school was a long time ago, and times are changing. People are changing. *You* are not changing.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

No way could me and Steve lose touch. He's my best friend! I'm *his* best friend!

BARRY  
MANALONE

The two of you have already started drifting apart. I know that you already see and feel what I'm saying. He's out there living life. Over the next few years, the growing difference between you will become an uncrossable divide. You know how lately you and Steve have been meeting up less frequently, and it feels a little bit more awkward each time?

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Yes...

BARRY

MANALONE

It's the beginning of the end, I'm afraid.  
Within a few years from now you and  
Steve will no longer be in touch at all.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Shite. I end up with *no friends*? Really?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Really.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

That's terrible. That's *shameful*.

BARRY  
MANALONE

Yes. It certainly is. In your long solo  
decades to come, you will often feel  
worse about having no friends than you do  
about being perpetually single and never  
having sex.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Jesus shitting Christ.

BARRY  
MANALONE

Indeed. And the ultimate horror is that  
you will *get used to it*. By the time you  
turn 50, you will have got used to  
everything. You'll even develop your own  
cute little make-do philosophy about it all.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

How are you still alive? Why haven't you

done the honourable thing?

BARRY  
MANALONE

We'll get to that. But you haven't heard it all yet. You only know about two aspects of your failure right now, the romance part and the friends part. There's still another angle...

Barry Manalone points at the notepad and pen on The Young Man's bedside table.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Oh, *shiiit...* Please tell me that I at least make it as a writer!

BARRY  
MANALONE

You never make it as a writer. You have no success of any kind with writing. You will never have a single word published anywhere, other than by yourself on the Internet.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Internet? What's that?

BARRY  
MANALONE

It's best that you find out for yourself.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

And I really never have sex? I really don't ever have a wife or girlfriend? And I *really* end up with no friends?

BARRY

MANALONE  
It's a lot to take in.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

You're telling me. Wow. But hang on.  
You seem reasonably well-dressed and  
sane. What *do* I end up doing?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Well. You know how you've been  
working in a series of dead-end jobs,  
because you 'know' you're going to be a  
professional writer one day?

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Fuck.

BARRY  
MANALONE

Exactly. One of those dead-end jobs will  
end up becoming your entire working life.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

What about my family? My biological  
family?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Gone.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Gone? In what way, gone?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Your parents are long dead. Dad dies in

the early 2000s. It will be relatively quick for him. He won't suffer too much. About five years after he goes, Mum will get ill. Very ill, I'm sorry to tell you. Her suffering will be long and brutal. It'll be the worst thing you'll ever see in your life.

A beat. The Young Man stares at Barry Manalone. Barry Manalone stares at The Young Man.

BARRY  
MANALONE

After Mum dies, the tenuous connections that you have with the rest of the family will simply disintegrate.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

So let me get this straight. I survive at least until I'm you – until I'm 52 – without ever having a romantic relationship of any description?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Correct.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

No sex either?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Only with yourself. And before you reach your late 40s, even masturbation will grind to a halt.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

And I am going to lose my best friend

within a few years from now?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Correct.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

I *really* go all those years from my mid-20s to my early 50s without a single friend?

BARRY  
MANALONE

You sure do, pal.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

And the writing never goes anywhere? I never have *anything* published, anywhere, ever?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Not even a comma. Some will try to tell you that online self-publishing counts as being published, but it really doesn't.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

What does *online* mean?

BARRY  
MANALONE

You'll find out.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

No girlfriend or wife. No children. No friends. No writing career of any kind. I'll ask you again. How the hell am I – how

are *you* – still alive? When you saw where it was all leading... why didn't you end it all?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Because there is one other thing you won't ever have.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

What's that?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Courage.

Another beat passes.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

I don't think I like you, my genie from the future...

BARRY  
MANALONE

You don't like anyone.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Could you do one thing for me?

BARRY  
MANALONE

Name it.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Make me forget we had this conversation. Let me discover the future for myself as it happens. Take away all memory of

meeting you.

BARRY  
MANALONE

I had a feeling you'd ask me that.  
However...

Barry Manalone pats the side of the time machine.

BARRY  
MANALONE  
(CONT'D)

The only way I could oblige would be by  
paying myself a visit, just before I set out  
to visit you, and stopping me from coming  
here...

THE YOUNG  
MAN

So go and do that.

BARRY  
MANALONE

But the timeline has to be preserved. The  
paradoxes!

THE YOUNG  
MAN

You've already done it. Think back to  
when you were me. *Do you remember*  
meeting you like this, when you were me?

BARRY  
MANALONE

I do not.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

There you go. So it's already happened.  
You've already stopped yourself coming  
back to see me. In order to preserve the

timeline and avoid paradoxes, you have to go and do it now.

BARRY  
MANALONE

Damn. We watch *way* too much TV. I yield to my better self. Is there anything else you want to ask me, before I go? Not that you'll remember.

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Just one thing.

BARRY  
MANALONE

Yes?

THE YOUNG  
MAN

Is it worth it? The way things end up, I mean. Your life – *our* life – up there in the future? Is it worth all the failure?

Barry Manalone opens his mouth to answer, but stops, shrugs, and gets back into his time machine. The time machine throbs and glows and disappears.

The Young Man blinks, looks confused, seems to recollect that he was reading a book, and goes back to doing just that.

## **TURNING 50** **ALONE FOREVER**

What is it like to turn 50 when you're Alone Forever?

Turning 50 is a heck of a milestone, and being Alone Forever *forever* is a pretty significant thing too.

What's the combination of the two things like?

Each milestone birthday experience will be different for everyone, but here is what this one was like for me.

\*

When I wake on the morning of turning 50, at first I simply don't remember that it's such a momentous day.

I lay dozing for several minutes, thinking about nothing in particular. And then, out of nowhere, I remember.

Suddenly springing into full wakefulness, I *grin*.

Somehow, against all the odds, I have made it to another big one. Yet another milestone I thought I'd never reach.

50 today.

*Made it, ma! Top of the world!*

Naturally I must think of my dead mother. What sort of Norman Bates-loner-loser-weirdo-incel-creep would I be, otherwise?

I get out of bed. Eat breakfast. Watch some morning TV. All quiet on the news front in this wonderfully boring year of 2018.

\*

I read for an hour or two, as is my habit. I consider mowing the front lawn, decide against it.

The postman walks past the window, on his way from one neighbour to the next.

There is no mail delivery for me today. No birthday cards. Likewise, I will receive no birthday text messages or phone calls.

This ‘radio silence’ from other people on my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday is the single biggest difference from my last big milestone birthday, my 40<sup>th</sup>.

Ten years ago, I received birthday cards from three family members, well-wishing texts from two people at work, and a friendly, joshing phone call from another work colleague. *You old bastard!*

Today there is nothing. I will not hear from anyone at all today.

I was not expecting anything, because the past ten years have been the most significant of my Alone Forever life. The past ten years have been the capstone on it all. Today’s lack of anything from other people is perfectly consistent with who I am. It cannot be emphasised enough. The journey through my 40s to the age of 50 has been *decisive*. The total devolution of my human relationships is complete.

It feels somewhat... bracing.

\*

I brush my teeth, splash my face.

I consider shaving, decide not to. Might it be time for a beard, now that I’m 50?

(50! I can’t keep that stupid grin from my face. It feels like a near-miraculous achievement for me to reach 50. Because it is one. All things considered.)

I examine my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I already have a few days’ growth of beard. The bristles are mostly silver or grey.

I am suddenly enticed by the idea of growing a silver-grey beard now that I’m 50.

I have never been anything other than clean-shaven in my whole life. Every time I decide to grow a beard, no matter how enthusiastic for the idea I think I am, I never make it past the itching stage. Two weeks, max.

A beard now would be quite a departure. Will I succeed? I tend not to succeed, as a rule, so it might be nice to succeed with something.

And so I skip shaving today. Maybe this time the beard will happen.  
(The beard didn't happen.)

\*

I head out to the shops. Only because I need bread and milk. While at the supermarket, I make two extra purchases: a small lemon cake, and a pot of custard.

The shop assistant that I speak to at checkout (one hello and a couple of thank-yous on each side) is the only person I speak to all day.

The cake and custard is for tonight. I am not a complete monster. I do have some plans for my 50th birthday. Which is today, in case I'd forgotten.

\*

The afternoon stretches out. I pass it on the computer. Doing my writing. Fuck knows why. As well as being a social, romantic and sexual failure, I am a failed writer, too.

I dash off a thousand words that will eventually morph into the first part of *Being Yourself Alone Forever*. Then I sit and stare aimlessly around the room for a time, letting my mind roam free, thinking about nothing, the way you tend to do when you're Alone Forever.

I play some games on the computer while it grows dark outside.

For dinner I make myself some pasta with cheese and chilli sauce. I eat it from a plate on my lap whilst watching random snippets of things on YouTube.

Normally I would watch a movie, but I have no concentration tonight.

I keep thinking about the momentousness of turning 50.

30 and 40 never felt this momentous. 50 feels different from them.

What is so different about 50?

The true finality of failure. *That's* what's different.

There is something in the thought that pleases me. A curious, mischievous delight.

The pressure is off now.

Turning 50 is the bell at the end of the fight.

\*

I open the lemon cake and place it in a bowl. I microwave the custard and pour it over the lemon cake.

I carry the bowl into my living room at 8pm on the evening of my 50th birthday.

‘Alexa, play *Happy Birthday*,’ I command.

The device on the table in the corner of the room obeys my command, and plays *Happy Birthday*. It’s a peculiar version of the song that sounds like it was recorded a hundred years ago, but no matter.

*Happy Birthday* finishes playing as I take my first mouthful of cake with custard.

I laugh out loud. I should have gone all-in on this moment. I should have got 50 candles for the cake, and blown them out. That really would have raised the comedy bleakness stakes.

I’ll have to remember to do it for my 60<sup>th</sup>.

## **REQUIEM FOR A SEX DRIVE**

Life as a middle-aged Alone Forever man is not easy. Except for when it is easy. The lifelong state of being Alone Forever gets paradoxically easier, in some ways, the farther you go. My life as an Alone Forever young man is something that is decades past. I would not go back to it. Things now are so much easier.

I know that this won't sound right to many younger readers. It seems unlikely that the despair and frustration of Alone Forever youth could get anything but worse as a lifespan unfolds.

What makes it *easier* to be Alone Forever at age 52, say, than at age 22?

Several things make it much easier. First, you don't have to deal with other people in the same way. Or rather, they change their ways of dealing with you. When you get older, other people withdraw to a distance. They leave you alone. They stop pestering you to be different from whatever it is that they privately think you are.

While you're young, your parents apply a lot pressure. Most of it hopefully well-meaning, some of it not. Both my parents are dead. There's no pressure coming from them.

Through the simple process of growing older, your psychology undergoes changes both subtle and gross. One huge psychological change as the years and decades have flickered past has been my ever-decreasing *expectation of change*.

When you're young and Alone Forever (a song you won't be hearing on the radio anytime soon), you think that everything will work itself out, like it always does in a movie. You think you will 'somehow' end up with a version of the standard life that everyone else has. It seems impossible that you won't. You are sure about this. It's a stubborn belief that takes time to fade, as youth gives way to early middle age, but can then vanish completely in an instant, whipping the ground from under your feet in a single breathtaking moment (*cf.* my Great

Epiphany).

And for me, one change stands out above the rest.

Sometime in my late 40s I experienced the end of my sex drive.

\*

As a young man I had the standard sex drive *of* a young man. My sex drive was a ravenous hunger. A deep, gnawing craving. Ungovernable and wild. Unquenchable. It could only have been satisfied by the very thing it craved, which of course it never had.

Masturbation brought relief, but never true satisfaction.

Having a sex drive was the strangest thing, looking back. At any moment, from out of nowhere, I could be inflamed by the sight of a smooth female posterior, or breast, or smile. Or voice.

At one of my office jobs one morning, aged 28 or so, I stood in an elevator behind a young woman whose hair was still wet from her morning shower. A womanly aroma of lemon and whatever else almost overpowered me. It was all I could do not to moan out loud. I held my breath. I stared fixedly at the ceiling until she got off, then released my breath in a long, pained sigh.

Such, in a nutshell, was the story of my 20s.

Rich desire. Zero satisfaction.

\*

Entering my 30s I still had the raw energy of a standard male sex drive, but its moments of maximal intensity were less frequent now. It was somewhat on the wane. Where it used to flare up several times a day, now it would only put in an appearance once a day, sometimes every other day.

By the end of my 30s, this was maybe once a week.

I started having to really *concentrate* during masturbation, or risk losing the

erection. If that happened I would then have to undertake the laborious and (let's face it) humiliating task of coaxing things back into life. I'm no expert on human sexuality (insert droll remark here), but I would speculate that when you reach this stage – the stage where you have to grit your teeth and concentrate in order to masturbate – it's very unlikely you're ever going to have a regular sex life.

Orgasms were less intense too. Every chronic masturbator who is reading this (and that'll be pretty much everyone reading this) knows that many self-administered orgasms are rather weak. The kind you hardly even feel – the 'eh, why did I even bother?' type. Others are **blockbuster** orgasms, the sort where you smugly wonder what the point is of trying to have sex with an actual person anyway.

In my late 30s, the blockbuster orgasms were rare indeed. Most were of the feeble sort.

As I turned 40 I was masturbating perhaps once a week, sometimes every two weeks. And always with a sense that I was performing a duty. Observing a habit.

I no longer felt the same way about getting a whiff of a woman's hair.

I could now see a pretty face or a jiggling pair of breasts without feeling much of anything at all.

Once in a while my libido could reappear without any apparent reason. But such occasions now came along once every few months, at best.

\*

My late 40s. This is when I knew without doubt that my sex drive was almost dead.

Bouts of spontaneous masturbation, with no effort required, were things of the past.

Masturbation soon stopped almost completely, barring the very occasional (pretty much monthly) stint, when I coaxed the machinery into life for the sake

of having something to do that was different from my usual routine.

As I head now through my early 50s, towards my mid-50s, there is barely a scrap of sexual desire left in me.

Very occasionally I notice a wisp of the old feeling – about 2-3% of the old throbbing engine’s horsepower – when I see an attractive woman.

When the old spirit stirs, I stare too much, and I think, and marvel that the drive is still, in some sense, there.

But it is like an old man’s sense of smell. It *works*, technically, but there’s no real gusto to it. And ultimately no point.

\*

My final, considered view is that the waning and disappearance of the sex drive is not something to be lamented for the lifelong Alone Forever.

When it goes, one’s true accommodation with Alone Forever destiny may be just around the corner.

The Alone Forever life can be seen as a journey towards acceptance.

The kind of acceptance that doesn’t have to be thought about, worked at, or renewed daily.

Acceptance that just happens. Is just your life.

## 24 December 2019

I emerge from my office building late on Christmas Eve afternoon. It's the final week of the year. We're now a few days past the winter solstice. None of the few people in my daily life care at all about things like the winter solstice and I know that mentioning it to them will bring much sighing and rolling of eyes. Weird Barry Manalone is being weird again. So the winter solstice is something I only think about to myself. The passing of the solstice means we're on our way back to lighter evenings now. Already this afternoon it seemed to stay light for a little bit longer, but it was probably my imagination. Most things are.

It's Christmas Eve for the rest of humanity, and there's an unmistakable pumped-up, charged energy about the streets. An energy that's most obvious in the way people *walk*. They seem to walk all sped-up, Charlie Chaplin-style. All larger than life itself. All of them bustling along on their urgent ways from wherever they've been to wherever they're going.

There's no rush for me. I stroll to my bus home through this late afternoon on Christmas Eve. I have developed quite a bit of armoured plating over the course of my Alone Forever life – but this, right now, this late afternoon of Christmas Eve, is still my year's absolute low point. My own personal solstice.

Christmas Eve is the time of the year when I *feel it* the most. This is when Alone Forever is something to be regretted. Not accepted. Certainly not celebrated. This is when everything I am and everything I am not is something to be bitterly deplored. Christmas Eve is when the multiple overlapping failures of my life all get me by the throat and *squeeze*.

For the past week everybody at the office has been asking me: 'Are you all set for Christmas?'

For a month I have been listening to Christmas songs in every retail outlet and on every passing car radio.

TV advertisements in regular times are about togetherness and fun and togetherness and happiness (and togetherness). At Christmas, they're even more so, with an extra few layers of togetherness on top – just to make sure the message gets across. The message that Christmas is all about togetherness.

If I could put myself into cryo-sleep every year from November 30<sup>th</sup> to January 2<sup>nd</sup>, I would.

\*

I wander up to my bus stop. I stand well back from a knot of excited people who are waiting for the same bus as me.

They've all got plump shopping bags. They've all got that air of repressed excitement about them. They're positively bursting at the seams with Christmas spirit. They're looking around at me, and looking dangerously cheerful, but no, I'm not having any of their nonsense. I pretend to be engrossed in something on my phone. Smartphones were made for the Alone Forever to pretend to be engrossed by.

I glance up to check if the bus is coming. Across the street, walking along the pavement on the other side, is a young father with two children. One child on each hand. A girl and a boy, both infants. The children are at the age when they are fizzing and bouncing with the sheer energy of the most wonderful time of the year. Their Dad seems rather happy with life too. All the sleepless nights must feel worth it for a magical time like this. Christmas is always best when you're a child, but even when you're no longer a child yourself, you can still enjoy your own children's enjoyment of Christmas. I imagine what kind of day that man will have tomorrow. He passes under a streetlight. He is about twenty-five years younger than me.

Alone Forever is forever-failure. To undo the harm it wreaks, you would need something more than just a time machine. You would need a reality-changing machine.

Alone Forever is the kind of failure that after a certain point simply cannot ever be made right. I am a long way past that point. There will be no miraculous Hollywood reversal of this fortune.

My bus finally comes. Our bus. I file on board behind the boisterous group, all still maximally infused with the Christmas spirit. They seem to be an extended family group, three generations. Tomorrow they'll all be together, enjoying the occasion and each other.

Tomorrow I will have the kind of Christmas Day that I have come to know in recent years. A quiet Wednesday at home.

It's a fairly full bus. We're all forced to take seats on the upper deck. The boisterous group trots to the back. I seat myself near the front. It's a noisy Christmas Eve bus. I am ready for it. I am not keen on music, and rarely listen to it for pleasure, but in public I always carry with me a set of earbuds. I get them out now, plug them into my phone, and play some of *Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of The War of the Worlds*. Soon I am immersed in the valour of Thunderchild. *Come on, Thunderchild!*

The lively group gets off the bus. They have to file past me to get to the stairs. One of the party, a younger woman, gives me a smiling look. Perhaps she is thinking about wishing me a happy Christmas. She doesn't.

## **THE NIGHTCLUB**

1987. I am 19 years old. Yes, all of these episodes from my youthful past occurred within a few years of each other. The eight-or-so years between ages 16 and 24 are crucial. You either lay your foundation then, like everybody else, or you don't. So much of importance happens to us then. Or doesn't.

\*

I was out and about, in a nightclub in the city centre.

At that time, I still had a couple of friends. The same two friends that I would lose touch with before my mid-twenties, and never replace.

Both of those friends had other friends – who were not exactly my friends too, but friendly enough. I was an orbiting satellite in the wider friendship group. Sometimes I tagged along on their nights out. I never enjoyed these nights out until I got drunk enough for them to seem enjoyable. Part of the problem was having to cope with five or six other people at the same time. To this day I can still only deal comfortably with one other person at a time.

After the euphoria of drunkenness wore off, it was my settled habit, which the others all accepted, to wander away from the group without telling them, and go home.

Which is what happened on this Saturday night in the nightclub. It was well after midnight. It was one of those nights where I had not brought enough money to get properly drunk. I only had my taxi fare home, and I felt disappointed about everything. I was toying with the idea of spending the taxi money on a couple of last drinks, then walking home. A good idea in principle — I would certainly enjoy the drinks — but then the hour-long walk would soon take the edge off my inebriation. It seemed a tough decision. I stood near the bar, irresolute, weighing the pros and cons.

‘You look lost!’ shouted a voice in my ear.

I turned to see an attractive girl standing beside me. I automatically checked

the vicinity for her boyfriend and/or her group of friends. She seemed to be alone.

‘I’m not lost!’ I yelled in her ear, after too long a hesitation.

‘So what are you doing?’ she yelled back.

I had a vague idea of what to do next from every movie I’ve ever seen.

I nodded at the packed bar.

‘Would you like a drink?’

Her name was Michelle. That was her actual, real name. She worked in the box office at a local concert venue. She had dark frizzy 1980s hair. These details are all true. Michelle, in the astronomically unlikely event that she ever reads this, might remember herself, and remember meeting me, and remember that night. But I doubt that I have stuck in her memory, as will become clear.

We went together to the bar. Already, just because of this, my head was spinning.

People at the bar were packed three-deep. We had a few minutes’ wait. We talked. Within about half a minute of starting to talk, I saw a look on her face that I knew well. She had perceived something ‘off’ in my manner. My performance of a regular fellow was enough to fool a few casual fellow drinkers on a night out. It was not enough to evade the detection of an attractive young woman being bought a drink.

I tried to recover the ground I had lost, talking ever-faster, trying to find surer footing, but only succeeded in slipping farther away. We got to the front of the bar and waited for one of the bar staff to notice us. By now things were pretty desperate. I sensed that I had already failed in a fundamental and irreparable way. The bar staff were ignoring us. It was excruciating trying to fill this gap with smalltalk. Then a barman took our order and went off to fill glasses. I pulled out my last ten pound note. This was my taxi fare home.

‘That’s your last tenner, isn’t it?’ said Michelle, accurately.

‘No!’ I protested.

We got the drinks and moved away to a standing table, where we chatted for another minute. About what, I don't remember. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. It was already too late to save myself.

Michelle leaned toward me. I presented my ear, as you do in loud nightclubs.

'I have to go and find my friend!' she yelled.

'Okay! I'll be right here,' I said.

She walked away, taking her well-earned drink with her.

I watched her go until she was out of sight in the crowd. I finished my drink in a couple of gulps, waited for fifteen minutes just to be sure, and walked home.

## **THE SUICIDAL ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM**

**Q:** You talk about suicide a hell of a lot in your books. Whatever other point you're making, sooner or later you always seem to circle back to suicide.

Do you really think your life will end in suicide one day?

**Barry Manalone:** Oh, I certainly hope so.

**Q:** You *hope* so? That's an outrageous thing to say! You *hope* so?

**Barry Manalone:** Yes, and it's not a gloomy or negative or outrageous thing to say at all. If you think it is, you haven't really read the books.

**Q:** It's not negative? How can it not be negative?

**Barry Manalone:** You've read the first two books, so you must know the perspective I have on suicide, which I repeat over and over (and over).

**Q:** Uh... remind me and the readers about your perspective.

**Barry Manalone:** Okay. Suicide should be every rational person's preferred means of death. Whoever they are, and whatever their life is like. Alone Forever or not. Because what's anyone's *alternative* to suicide?

**Q:** *Not-suicide?* Living on, without thinking about committing suicide?

**Barry Manalone:** If a human life is *not* ended by suicide, how is the end brought about?

**Q:** I see where you're going. By natural causes, of course.

**Barry Manalone:** Yes. And what is the typical scenario for a ‘natural causes’ death?

**Q:** Have you *really* just done sarcastic air-quotes at me?

**Barry Manalone:** I have. Please answer my reasonable question. What is the typical ‘natural’ human death like?

**Q:** Yes, I remember your point from all the times you rammed it home in the first two books.

Most ‘natural’ death involves some kind of suffering, and most often it’s a drawn-out affair.

Those who die quickly, without prolonged pain and suffering, are in the minority.

**Barry Manalone:** That’s exactly it. That’s all I’m saying and all I’ve ever said about suicide. Of all the people you’ve ever known who have passed away, how many have had easy deaths? I mean the kinds of deaths where everyone says ‘but I just saw him yesterday and he was fine!’ Not many. Maybe even none.

The majority of people who come to the end of their lives will undergo an experience of considerable mental distress and physical suffering that can last weeks, months, sometimes years.

All kinds of nasties go along with supposedly ‘natural’ deaths. Dependency upon others. Hospitals. Appointments. Treatments. Surgeries. Carers. Hospices. Dealing with family and friends, if you still have any. Having to get by *without* family and friends, if you don’t have any. That whole ghastly show.

Do I need to spell out what the problem is for the truly Alone Forever person at the end of his or her life?

**Q:** I can’t help thinking that you’re being unnecessarily pessimistic about it

all. Some people *do* drop dead in a moment, you know. Or go quietly in their sleep.

**Barry Manalone:** Relatively few people die that way, particularly with 21<sup>st</sup> century medical science being what it is. You can't rely on being one of the lucky ones who make a graceful exit. You can't rely on going quickly and quietly. The odds are not in your favour. If I was a betting man – which, come to think of it, I am – I would never place such a wager.

My stance on suicide is based on the simple understanding of how human life usually ends.

Being determinedly pro-suicide is logical, practical and sensible. It is compassionate and humane. What is so controversial about it?

**Q:** Granted, the way you present it, there's not much to argue about...

**Barry Manalone:** But you're going to argue about it anyway.

**Q:** I have to. The way the whole question of suicide is framed in our culture, I'm *programmed* to be against it. Life is a net positive. Unless you're afflicted by serious mental or physical illness, the basic experience of being alive is innately positive. You often state this yourself. Seeing things, tasting things. Books, music, movies, games. A good meal. Heck, even *other people* are a feature of the world that gives us comfort and pleasure. You can't deny any of that.

**Barry Manalone:** I wouldn't deny it. People most certainly are a positive feature of the world. I wouldn't have things to read, eat, watch, or play if it wasn't for other people. I wouldn't have light and heat and shelter if it wasn't for other people.

**Q:** I can't accept suicide as a pre-emptive solution to any supposed future

circumstance. Do you understand how irresponsible it is for you to be so pro-suicide in your books, which will be read by many frightened, vulnerable young people?

**Barry Manalone:** Of course. Which is why I am so keen to emphasise that my perspective on suicide is a pragmatic one. There should be no anguish involved in it. No depression. No despair. Just a businesslike doing away with oneself when conditions dictate.

I'm not saying I would go home from a doctor's office where I'd just received Bad News and immediately get started on building my own personal gallows. But it's an option I'm glad to have in my back pocket, should that kind of scenario come about.

Young, otherwise healthy Alone Forever people who are feeling miserable and depressed about their lives should *not* attempt to retrofit my standpoint on suicide to their own lives.

I'm a middle-aged man in a very specific set of personal circumstances, talking about what he'll do when he sees another specific set of circumstances coming around a bend in the road.

**Q:** But that begs the question of how soon to act before you *get* to this hypothetical set of circumstances. Do you carry on around the bend in the road to see what happens, or do you drive off the road immediately?

**Barry Manalone:** I acknowledge that tricky problem. It is the *only* problem, though. Everything else is crystal-clear and resolved. I cannot imagine ever changing my mind on this front.

**Q:** Okay. What if you get a stabbing pain in your head one day, and you decide it must be head cancer, and hang yourself? But it was only a headache, and you just happened to be feeling a bit low that day about being Alone

Forever?

**Barry Manalone:** I'm not saying the situation is perfect or that there are not any wrinkles. The kind of scenario you've just sketched out is something I do think about. How *sure* would I have to be? How soon would be too soon? If some disease gets me, would I endure all the stages of investigation and diagnosis? Would I put up with any time at all in a hospital bed? If so, how long? A week? Two weeks? A month?

What's my threshold for no longer wanting to be bothered with it all?

I would probably favour going slightly early, to be sure of avoiding the unthinkable horror of 'too late'. Whatever I chose, it'd be my personal choice. Why is it anybody else's business?

Is there really anything more to say? Can you *seriously* disagree with my standpoint?

**Q:** In principle? Of course not. It's the *practical* side of it all that I have my doubts about. How would it work, in practice? You acknowledge that your stance might force you to act rather early, and that's what troubles me, because it risks prompting you to act when there is no need.

**Barry Manalone:** That is a worry, yes, but as I have just explained, for me it is by far the lesser of two evils. The other evil being the risk of leaving it too late.

I no longer worry about never having had a girlfriend, about being unmarried, about not having children, about not having any friends. That whole aspect of life is comprehensively finished for me. I *do* still sometimes fret about being a failed writer, I will confess, but even that regret is fading with each passing year.

By far the principal worry of my Alone Forever middle age is exactly how the endgame will play out.

Maybe one day I will simply gasp and clutch at my chest and drop dead, like people do in movies. Then this discussion will be moot.

**Q:** Some of the Alone Forever might *enjoy* being in hospital and being made a fuss of.

**Barry Manalone:** Good for them, but *I'm not them*. They're not me. We really should do away with all notion that we have to behave like others or think like others or feel like others, even other Alone Forever people. *Especially* other Alone Forever people.

The ‘other people’ boat sailed a long time ago and I wasn’t on it.

The source of your resistance here is our deep cultural taboo against suicide. Which is a sensible taboo to have, I think, on the whole. Imagine what the suicide rate would be if it wasn’t such a taboo...

**Q:** Hardly anyone would make it to adulthood.

**Barry Manalone:** Bottom line? The Alone Forever life is a strange, invisible life separate from the ‘life’ that people know. We must have our own personal standards.

**Q:** We? I thought you said the Alone Forever shouldn’t take their cues from each other?

**Barry Manalone:** I don’t mean ‘we’ as a group. If you think ‘Alone Forever’ is any kind of community, you need to urgently *unthink* that view.

We are a *kind of* community, no doubt. We share thoughts and observations and stories. We compare notes about the strange lives we lead on the margins. But there is no overall group ideology.

When you’re Alone Forever, you have stepped outside and you are not coming back. Out here, where we are alone by ourselves – where we are Alone

Forever – is the only context in which we have to make our decisions.

And there is no pesky ‘we’ about it.

**Q:** It's all too bleak. I just don't like it.

**Barry Manalone:** As I believe our modern Zen masters on the Internet would say: It is what it is.

# **SUICIDE WHISKEY**

**Journal Extracts**

**March 2020**

## **6 March 2020**

Today brings the biggest jump of Virus cases yet recorded on a single day.

A supermarket boss casts doubt on Government assurances that there is no threat to food supply chains.

Panic buying ensues, the news media salivates, and it feels like the early part of a disaster movie. The montage of news reports setting the scene for the coming collapse.

I sit in the restaurant in my office building, looking around at the normal unfolding of a normal Friday afternoon.

I'm not going to have an easy pandemic. There will be no furlough for me, no working from home, so I won't even get to enjoy not being at the office. We have already been told that nothing at all will change for us at the office.

The stakes for me in a potentially life-engulfing world crisis are pretty low. There's not much life to be engulfed. No wife, no children. I am sufficiently estranged from my blood relations that I wouldn't battle across a burning city to save any of them (nor them me). No friends. The only people I know on a day-to-day basis are people at work. I'm on friendly terms with many of them, some more than others, but none are my friends.

This afternoon two work colleagues ask me if they might catch the Virus from Chinese food. I assume they are joking and politely laugh. They are not joking.

## **7 March 2020**

My 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday later this year. My 50s are a bit of a slog so far. I *breezed* through my 30s and 40s, looking back. Barely noticed any of those birthdays. My 50s feel different. This decade of birthdays is far more forbidding. Each is another great tolling of a bell.

This evening the rumblings from Italy become more ominous. The Italian

authorities are preparing to quarantine a large chunk of the country. A step straight from a movie about a doomsday plague. It's all very Apocalyptic and, it must be admitted, exciting.

Societal collapse could happen. Once a certain tipping point is reached, vital services are disrupted, and once that happens the social fabric unravels *fast*. The thought floats into my mind: at the end, if the end comes, I will want a bottle of alcohol. I don't drink, and haven't for many years (when I stopped being able to cope with hangovers, I stopped myself having hangovers).

But if the end does come because of this, I would want a few drinks at the end.

I make a mental note to get some booze in.

### **8 March 2020**

Today's Virus news: it's still spreading, as if it's some kind of virus. People are in the curious state of laughing it off and being fearful at the same time. At work, the new wall-mounted hand-sanitisers are used a lot.

I walk down the road to buy lunch. On my way back I see, sitting in the window of the coffee shop opposite, the exact type of young woman that I used to yearn to meet, 35 years ago. Back then I believed I would eventually meet a nice librarian or bookstore worker. The student type. And here is one now: dark-framed glasses, dark hair tied back in a loose ponytail. She's leaning over a book, scribbling notes in a notepad. Straight from central casting. The girl I should have met, the woman I should have married.

While I stare, she glances up – not at me; at something past me – and looks back at her book.

### **9 March 2020**

The authorities in Italy have placed the entire nation into 'quarantine', as the news media melodramatically frames it. More details are emerging about the Virus. It takes 5 days to show symptoms, raising the prospect of asymptomatic

carriers in the general population.

The news bulletins and webpages fill with Coronathis and Coronathat.

I pass the evening in my usual way. On the computer. And watching TV.

I catch up on the last few episodes of *The Walking Dead*. The characters in this show are sometimes capable of having a good life many years after the collapse of civilisation. I still would not want to partake of that life. Much too communal for my liking. That life is best which is lived alone.

I watch a prepper-type video on YouTube that recommends forming alliances with neighbours to deter the bands of marauders that would spring up in the wake of societal collapse.

‘Lone wolves cannot make it,’ says the voiceover.

I wholeheartedly agree. Not because I want to, but because it is simply, self-evidently, straightforwardly true. The lone wolf is devoured by the pack.

## **10 March 2020**

This evening I watched *Contagion* (2011), an old-fashioned movie in one aspect: it has an all-star ensemble cast, some of whom are killed off unexpectedly early.

I read a few pages of *The Road* before sleep. The ultimate post-apocalyptic tale. Got to see what’s coming.

## **11 March 2020**

Would I be more bothered about the Virus if I wasn’t Alone Forever? I believe I would be. The non-Alone Forever have so much more to lose in something like this.

If I was a man with a wife and children, a broad circle of friends and extended family (a life as strange and unfathomable to me as mine would be to them), I believe I would be *frantic* about the Virus.

To the shops for some prepping supplies.

I fill a basket with stuff I think I’ll need if the lights go out and never come

back on. The girl who serves me is wearing clear plastic gloves. Cash payments are discouraged.

### **12 March 2020**

Countries close their borders. Schools close in most of Europe and North America. The stock markets crash, revive, and crash again.

At the office, most are still pooh-poohing it all. We are united about one thing: bitterness that we're not going to be furloughed. In the immortal words of Ted Striker: what a pisser.

### **13 March 2020**

I already know better than to try, but I have another go at talking to work colleagues about the possibility of systemic collapse. But I am talked over several times until I give up. Nobody will listen to a man like me without showing extreme irritation, and ultimately not listening. Nothing I say is to be taken seriously. It's all about having the kind of 'regular guy' social capital that buys legitimacy. I have none.

### **14 March 2020**

Another hectic day on the Virus front. They're all hectic. More borders closed, more things cancelled.

One of my Alone Forever touchstones has always been: I must be prepared to make my exit at any time.

Until now this was always in some theoretical future.

Now either the Virus could get me – statistically unlikely, but still very possible; or systemic societal collapse could get me – also unlikely, on the face of it, but still possible.

My vague plan for future suicide involves me having a few drinks of something alcoholic before doing the deed.

But I need the booze with which to make that happen.

I get off the bus after work and head into the local off licence. Two men, both vaguely Balkan, run the place. They're always sitting talking behind the counter. They always seem angry whenever there's a customer. I point to the bottle I want. I'm after a half-bottle of Jameson Irish whiskey. It takes them a few seconds to accept that I only want the half-bottle. If the time ever comes when I open it, I will only be taking a few drinks. I will not be hanging around long enough to enjoy a full bottle of anything.

'How much is it?' I ask, getting my wallet out.

The older of the two men lifts the bottle off the shelf and turns around without saying anything.

It's as if I haven't spoken at all.

This happens to me a lot in day-to-day life. I speak out loud. My voice is loud and resonant. I know I can be heard clearly by others. I know that they can hear my clearly-enunciated words. But still people fail to acknowledge, much less respond.

'How much is it?' I say again, at exactly the same pitch and volume as before.

'Fourteen ninety-nine,' he says.

At home, I stash the bottle down the side of the sofa. Within easy reach when I need it.

I pass the evening dipping into the news on TV. The ship sinking a little more every day.

### **15 March 2020**

Feel better today after picking up the Suicide Whiskey last night. Just a small step toward arranging my lack of future, but it makes me more confident about the future. I'm happy knowing that things are arranged, should the worst happen. Alone Forever logic is peculiar and twisted, makes no sense, and nobody who isn't it will ever understand.

Another tricky day at work. Everyone talking about the Virus. Today, we're meant to be laughing at the people around the world who are panic-buying toilet paper. At first I keep quiet. Whenever you talk to people, you enter their world. Keeping one's own counsel is always the best move.

Later, my mood changes, I feel like talking, and I outline some of my concerns about a possible societal collapse. Yes, the toilet paper thing is amusing, ha-ha-ha *et cetera*, but it's possibly the first stirrings of something that needs careful observation. The toilet paper could be just the beginning. I go off on quite a speech about it all.

They all look at me, and appear to listen to me, but don't. There is scoffing. There is scorn. When you're Alone Forever nobody listens to you or takes you seriously.

Another male member of staff, Mick, has some thoughts to offer. He is listened to with quiet respect. He's a married man with three grown children and a grandson on the way. Mick has social capital in abundance.

A long late night watching the news. I think of my Suicide Whiskey with strange satisfaction. Almost with hope.

There is a sense in which the Virus, if it does end the world, would let me off the hook.

Yes, I failed, and I failed hard, but all failure and all success would be rendered moot by the end of the world.

## **16 March 2020**

I went for another prepping mini-shop today and picked up some more groceries. Some packet soup and some cleaning products and two more six-packs of baked beans. I've been stocking up on baked beans. I cannot have too many baked beans. I am compelled to amass as many cans of baked beans as possible before the curtain falls. Let the marauders find my corpse beside my improbable stash of baked beans.

## **17 March 2020**

St Patrick's Day. But everybody has to stay in. Apart from those of us who have to go out to work. Much talk about it being such a shame nobody gets to celebrate St Patrick's Day this year. I know my place, and say nothing.

The Alone Forever tend to see ourselves in a mental mirror. We most often see ourselves as we imagine other people see us. Which begs a question: *do other people see us?*

We are vague and elusive quantities in the lives of other people.

They can plainly see that there is nothing to us, that we have no 'life', as such. We have no story. No context. We never talk about the people and events in our lives because there aren't any. But people don't properly understand this. They do not see that they see nothing. There has to be *something* to us, they think, but what is it? They continue to look for something that isn't there. They don't see it. They can't stop trying to see it. They blame us for its absence.

## **18 March 2020**

I have 24 toilet rolls. I bought them weeks ago, before the toilet roll thing really got going, when it was all still a rumour. Tonight I count my toilet rolls as if they're ammunition and I'm preparing for a zombie attack.

I get through approximately 1 toilet roll a week. I could probably make that stretch to 1.5 weeks if I had to. Assuming I do have to, I could have enough toilet roll for 36 weeks, until November. What will things be like in November?

Half-past midnight. I take a bag of rubbish out to the bin. I stand and listen. Perfect, unbroken silence. Usually at this time there would be the hum of traffic, people walking home after a night out, random shouts from nearby streets.

Tonight, not a sound to be heard or sight to be seen. A feeling of being the only person in the world.

## **19 March 2020**

California went into lockdown today. Many Americans call it ‘quarantine’ instead. I do like that term better.

Here, the supermarkets have started to make noises about their supply chains being unable to cope with a sustained run of panic buying.

The buses are empty, but continue to run. I am usually the only passenger.

What will happen? The disaster feels sure to come.

A busy day at work. I answer the phone and rattle the computer keyboard with mounting irritation. How did I let myself become this person? And how is it that I am still coming to work, with the world ending? How incredibly shit is the end of the world, if it’s like this?

Everyone has developed their own pet Theory of the Virus, which they expound and defend with passionate intensity. It was made in a lab, some say. The Army will be on the streets soon, others insist. Somebody’s son’s friend’s uncle knows this for certain. Et cetera.

I always wondered what it would be like to live through a time like this.

In fiction, Apocalypses are always so vital and interesting.

This one’s not.

## **20 March 2020**

The Government closes all the pubs, clubs, bars, and restaurants. All the theatres, cinemas, and gyms too. Life as we know it receives another shove in the back.

## **21 March 2020**

Covid, Covid, Covid.

At the office I’m again drawn into open conversation and speculation about the likely progress of the world under the heel of the Virus.

Unwisely, I become expansive on the topic. Instead of meekly going along

with the general tone and content of what everyone is currently saying, I garnish my views with some of the actual things that I think. I should never do this. People hate it.

‘You should stock up on candles, matches, lighters, batteries, that sort of thing,’ I say. ‘I can’t see us getting through all of this without a power cut or two.’

Nobody likes to hear this. Not because it’s not potentially true, *per se*, but because, well, it’s *me* saying it. And who am I? Not only am I manifestly a nobody. I am transparently false in everything. I am deemed by others to be inherently untrustworthy.

And rightly so. They are right to consider me a fraudulent character. Everything I am to them is false. The man they know is a performance, and an increasingly half-hearted one. I rarely choose to share anything of my actual self with people, because there is no actual self in which people could be at all interested. Everything they see and hear is simply me trying to represent myself as the kind of generic social self I believe they would like me to be. And failing to perform it well.

## **22 March 2020**

I still have the capacity to be uplifted by the first proper day of spring.

Today is *almost* that – almost a nice taster of a spring day. We’re not quite there yet, but it’s promising. Good to look at through a window, bright and colourful, the birds singing away merrily. But still bitingly cold out and about.

Today is Sunday. And it feels like a regular Sunday multiplied by ten. Everything still and quiet.

## **23 March 2020**

Office conversation continues to be dominated by the Virus.

Everybody continues to cherish their own individual Theory Of The Virus, which they feel compelled to make speeches about and hotly defend if

challenged.

I get weary of it, and constantly have to get up and go for walks in the corridor. Where I amble all the way to the Gents toilet at the far end. Wash my hands, thoroughly, sometimes twice, and then walk back to my desk – where the Virus chatter is all still going on. It is never far from people's minds.

I head home in an Uber. The buses now are too scarce to rely on. The Uber driver is as weary of it all as I am, but the Virus is an easy thing for us both to improvise smalltalk about, and so we do that. The passenger before me was sneezing and coughing, the driver tells me. Sneezing isn't a common feature of the Virus, we agree. The previous passenger probably only had a regular cold, or early seasonal allergies, we also agree.

When I get out, I open and close the door with my jacket sleeve.

At 8.30pm all TV channels broadcast a message from the Prime Minister. Everybody must now stay at home. Nobody should go outside except for one of a few specific reasons.

Later, I have a peculiar, thick feeling in my chest and throat.

A feeling like the beginning of a cold.

## **24 March 2020**

The morning after the lockdown announcement, I wake early and lay there listening.

I should be trying to get back to sleep, but I feel peculiarly alert. I listen to the street noises. There are people out there, calling to each other, and the sounds of road traffic as usual.

I still have the odd feeling in my throat and chest.

Is it my chest? Or my throat? Or both? Have I got a headache? I think I've got a headache. I might have the Virus.

Assume it's the Virus. Then I have had the Virus all along, for up to a week

it's been hiding out, biding its time, incubating, and this is its flowering. It will kill me, for sure. No. No. *It won't kill me.* If it comes to it, *I* will kill me. I will never be one of those people with plastic bubbles around their heads. It is decided.

I do a few things on the computer and forget about having the Virus. If the Virus is what this is, it is not troubling me much. I might not even stay off sick from work with it. I am quite taken with the idea of going out to work tomorrow in the formal lockdown that we're now in. Feels like it might be an adventure. Get myself out of the house, walk the empty streets. Travel in the Apocalypse.

Lots of stuff on the news today about more and more countries heading into versions of lockdown. India becomes the most notable addition to the growing list. Most countries in South America too.

*[Evening.]*

I now have a proper sore throat. It has come upon me over the course of today.

I am grimly fatalistic.

In a movie, I would take to my bed, fall into a delirium, and wake in a world where all people have vanished.

But I am not that lucky.

I worry about my throat, off and on, all evening. I compound the worry by reading in detail about the experiences of Virus patients with no apparent medical conditions who end up in hospital, get put into comas and onto ventilators, and every so often have to be turned like slabs of meat.

I check that my Suicide Whiskey is still where I left it.

But it's probably just a cold.

I switch off the TV. How long will I go on consuming hours of news every

day? It's habit-forming and mind-controlling. The conspiracy theorists were exactly right all along. No need for secret police and draconian law-enforcement when people will do whatever they're told to do anyway and like it.

I am cold, even though the wall thermometer shows a balmy 23 Celsius.

I put on a pullover, and keep it on in bed, shivering under the blankets.

I want to deny it, but there is no denying it.

There is a global flu pandemic going on, and I am coming down with something.

## **25 March 2020**

I decide today that I will include an edited version of my March journal in the final book of the Alone Forever trilogy. And why not reshape the whole book to reflect what is going on right now? It's an idea. I tend not to follow up on my ideas, but this one appeals.

There are two things that would make this journal more interesting for the future book:

1) I get the Virus.

2) I die of the Virus.

I might have sorted out 1), at least.

I really think this is the Virus.

The throat feels much worse today, all scratchy and raw.

I have the beginnings of a slight fever and a growing sensation of tightness and wheeziness in my lungs.

It is sometimes difficult to get a full, replenishing breath.

I lay awake until 4.30am, thinking about things.

Oh I can talk the talk, all right. I am absolutely *full of it*, in every sense. *Lots* of oh-so-grand verbiage about Alone Forever dignity and suicide and not submitting to horror and so on.

Now the moment of truth may be here, and I don't like it.

## **26 March 2020**

The sore throat is about 5x worse today. A sore throat like no other I have ever had. Feels like razor blades.

Some coughing for an hour after I get up. *Dry* coughing.

That seems to clinch it.

Is it the Virus? Is it my death?

## **27 March 2020**

The cough slightly worse today. And the sore throat even more painful. Now it's not just the 'razor blade' effect, but a feeling of a tight band gripping my entire neck.

Today I call into work sick. Because, well, I am sick.

Now this afternoon, the sudden onset of an impaired sense of taste and smell.

I was halfway through a caramel dessert pot, licking the spoon clean after each mouthful, relishing the creamy, caramel sweetness of it all.

The next spoonful tasted of almost nothing.

The spoonful after it tasted of nothing.

I got a clove of garlic from the cupboard and broke it open and smelt it. Nothing.

Same with the washing-up liquid. Soap. Deodorant. Nothing.

So I have a dry cough. A sore throat. And a loss of taste and smell.

Okay, then.

## **28 March 2020**

Still with the very sore throat. The dry cough even more pronounced today as well, worse in the morning, less so as the day wears on. This afternoon I start to feel that my breath is 'catching' when breathing deeply.

My firm decision: whatever happens, I will not go to hospital.

I am one of the sub-genre of Alone Forever people who dislikes being around other people. Perhaps we innately people-averse types are the majority among the Alone Forever tribe? Who knows. There are no studies of us and there never will be.

Whatever, in my case I could not stomach any kind of hospital scenario.

Today I saw pictures of the temporary field hospitals they're building around the country to accommodate Virus patients as the pandemic develops.

All those ranks of partitioned bedspaces.

No. Just no.

I lounge around the house, wasting chunks of hours at a time on nothing in particular. Curiously, despite the sore throat, the cough, the slight fever, and my nagging concerns... I don't feel all that unwell. The sore throat is pretty bad, but I've had worse common colds than this over the years. If this *is* the Virus, then I am one of the overwhelming majority for whom it really is like a mild cold.

### **29 March 2020**

Some coughing again this morning, but not as much as yesterday. My breath feels fine. The sore throat less sore. I have a running nose that requires frequent blowing.

My sense of taste and smell has returned enough for me to enjoy food again.

Long lazy Sunday. Do the days of the week have any meaning now? What the fuck do I care? I am constantly catching myself thinking about the world as if I belong somewhere in it. As if I am straightforwardly a 'person' like any other, with a 'life' like any other.

### **30 March 2020**

I eat dinner late, usually around 9pm, sometimes as late as 10pm. I watch something on TV or on the computer. I potter around, go to bed around 2am or

3am, and read for a while before sleep.

This is how I would choose to live, if I had the choice. Like this, in this fashion, forever.

Like Bruce Dern in *Silent Running*, only without the robots and the plants.

Like Tom Hanks in *Castaway*, only without Wilson and the gruesome self-dentistry.

How does my satisfaction with such a dull, empty life correlate with my persistent feeling of failure?

It doesn't correlate at all. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't have to. Logical rules do not apply here. You can be a hypocrite and still be right about everything.

My cold, or my bout of Covid-19, or whatever it was, is almost gone.

I get into my reading tonight, I don't switch off the lamp until well after 4am. And lay there listening in the dark.

### **31 March 2020**

The final day of March 2020. What a month.

Another day today of pottering around at home, in mostly good health. All symptoms gone, except one. My sore throat is stubbornly sticking around. I switch hourly between deciding it's nothing to worry about and deciding it's throat cancer.

This evening, over dinner of pasta with chilli and garlic, I watch *World War Z*, the movie of a book that I really must get around to reading. I recall that the movie came out to a mixed reception. So I am braced for it to be bad, but it's not a bad film at all. Not a classic, but I don't feel I've wasted my time.

Why am I talking about the films I watch and the food I eat in a journal (and now book) ostensibly to do with what it's like being Alone Forever at the end of the world?

Because *this is what it's like* being Alone Forever at the end of the world.

This ordinary, humdrum, moment-to-moment rhythm of life, is what the Alone Forever life is.

I'm sitting in a warm room, in a comfortable home, paid for with money earned at my secure job.

I have a full belly.

I'm watching a good movie.

And I've got a bit of a sore throat.

That's it.

This is what it is like for me to be Alone Forever at the end of the world. While the world watches and waits to see what will happen next, I also watch with them. I have much less to lose than almost anyone else, but what I do have to lose I want to keep hold of.

My life has not changed in lockdown. The Virus has only affected my life by changing other people's lives (as they keep reminding us). Work continues uninterrupted. I get up, potter around, look in a book, browse a few websites to amuse myself, go to work if it's a workday, come home, play some computer games, watch some TV and movies, eat some food, mess about on the Internet some more, and go to bed.

This was my life before and it is my life now. The Virus has not changed anything.

Except for my Suicide Whiskey.

I didn't have that before.

## THE LAST WORD

**Q:** So here we are. The final section of the final book of the Alone Forever trilogy.

**Barry Manalone:** Here we are indeed. Together again at the end. I feel quite unemotional.

**Q:** Is this definitely the end of the Alone Forever book series?

**Barry Manalone:** Yes. It definitely is the end. I won't be Douglas Adamsing a fourth instalment to the trilogy.

There is one more bit of housekeeping to be done sometime in 2021. I have some maintenance to do on all three books.

**Q:** Maintenance? Meaning what?

**Barry Manalone:** Fixing the odd typo. Tidying up some of my more convoluted sentences and paragraphs. And the overall formatting is wonky in parts too.

This year I reread the first two books for the first time, after a long gap. I'm not keen on the sound of my own voice in some parts. In fact, sometimes I make myself cringe a little. But the books are an honest picture of an Alone Forever man, with a certain kind of temperament, at a certain stage of his life, so I will leave the voice and content well alone.

**Q:** Why not start a new trilogy?

**Barry Manalone:** No. Well, I *could* distil another book or two from the material that I discarded to arrive at the present volume. The first draft of this book was about 60,000 words. The published version is only about 14,000

words. I'm pleased to have trimmed so much. Less is definitely more. I wanted this finale to be lean and mean, and I think it is.

**Q:** Hey, reassure us that this isn't your last word in another sense. Are you planning to jump off a tall building or something?

**Barry Manalone:** No! No plans to, anyway. I am still in the golden zone of Alone Forever.

**Q:** Really? This book is easily the gloomiest one of the three. All those stories from your youth... we've all been there, of course, but it was interesting to find out that you'd had the same kinds of experiences.

**Barry Manalone:** It needed to be made plain that I'm from pretty much the same soil. There's a commonality of experience in this Alone Forever thing.

**Q:** And those extracts from your journal are quite surprising. You often sound depressed about being Alone Forever. That doesn't support everything you went on about in the first two books.

**Barry Manalone:** Look at the date. The journal extracts are from a particular time of heightened anxiety. We're not immune from being influenced by the emotions of others. March 2020 was the most 2020-ish month of 2020. It really did seem for a time as if the end was nigh – for the world, for me, for everything. I thought it was interesting to log my changing mood from an Alone Forever perspective.

I included the journal section particularly for those readers who aren't really into the whole 'Alone Forever is gr8' spiel from the first two books. A necessary corrective.

I'm far from being the paragon of Alone Forever fundamentalism that the first two books sometimes seem to paint me as. As I said, I reread them this year,

for the first time since publication. I didn't like the impression they sometimes give that I am constantly in some state of transcendent Alone Forever ecstasy. I sometimes am. But actually, most often, I'm neutral about it all.

In any case, I never said in the first two books that I *never* succumb to periods of dejection. (I think 'dejection' is a much better term than 'depression' for the characteristic Alone Forever low mood.)

**Q:** Interesting... How often do you have similar periods of dejection in regular times?

**Barry Manalone:** Not often, and not for as long. That was what was so remarkable about March 2020, and 2020 as a whole.

I have noticed lately a small increase in the frequency of my bouts of dejection. Roughly one day in five, now, I can be pretty miserable about my life. I can have a properly gloomy day.

A year or two ago, only one day in twelve was a Gloom Day.

I suspect that progressing through my 50s is responsible for this. I'm acutely aware, a lot of the time, that *this is it* now. There really is no way back. Failure on all fronts is a *fait accompli*. Every five days or so, my mind gets glumly fixated upon that, even though I would like it not to.

**Q:** Lots of your readers would be delighted to be not-miserable most days. What's your secret?

**Barry Manalone:** There isn't a secret. Get older. Get used to it. Get a life, which turns out to be the Alone Forever life you already have. Not a deep secret.

**Q:** And we *really* won't hear from you again?

**Barry Manalone:** I said everything there was to say in Book 1, and in a few pages of it at that. The rest of that book, then the second book, and now *this*

book, is pretty much me singing the same chorus over and over again.

But if there *is* another Alone Forever book... it doesn't have to be from me.

Others could pick up the baton and run with it.

**Q:** What are you suggesting?

**Barry Manalone:** Maybe the Alone Forever books could be a franchise, who knows? One that is continued by other Alone Forever writers. A younger Alone Forever person might have something to say about their experience, something that doesn't fit in any of the usual places online.

Or how about an *older* Alone Forever person? There's got to be Alone Forever people out there aged 60 or 70 or older. They could say with justification that they really have lived the life, in every sense. What would they have to tell us?

**Q:** Would you like a woman?

**Barry Manalone:** Are you taking the piss?

**Q:** I mean, how about a woman picking up the pen and contributing to the mooted Alone Forever franchise? That would be interesting.

**Barry Manalone:** Oh, yes, of course. Any would-be contributors to the Alone Forever series would have my blessing, not that they need it. They don't even have to use the Alone Forever terminology that I've built up in these books. They could even denounce me and mock all my ways and I would love it.

So yes, let the Alone Forever trilogy become an Alone Forever franchise, written by whomever, and let the franchise go on without me.

Any reader may consider this a call to action.

Over time, if enough people contribute, we could assemble quite the library of Alone Forever testimonies, from all angles of experience.

**Q:** Imagine being able to access *that* kind of resource!

**Barry Manalone:** Yes, it would be quite something. And it doesn't take much to put one of these books together if you've already got something to work with. Many of us already keep journals. Many of us like to think we're writers (because clearly we haven't already got enough failure to deal with).

I think it's time to go now. Time to let go.

**Q:** Any last advice, for old time's sake?

**Barry Manalone:** Let me see... Look after yourself. That's number one. Don't fear turning 30. Don't worry about turning 40, or 50. None of the big milestone birthdays are anything to fear. It's the years *between* the milestone birthdays that you should pay attention to. It's in those long stretches of years that your Alone Forever character is built, and your resilience is either won or lost. Read a book every now and then. Go for walks. Eat a balanced and varied diet. Clean behind your ears. And *do* just be yourself – be your real, actual self, as much as you can be. People have got that exactly right, albeit in the wrong way. *Be* yourself just as you are, and may God have mercy on your soul. Don't wait for something to happen. Nothing's going to happen. Or if it does happen, it won't be because you specifically waited for it to happen. If you still want to escape, try to escape. If you fail to escape, when you get older you'll be glad you tried. Pay no attention to other people. Don't get cross with them. People are not individually to blame and you know they're not. Show some respect, even if you're never shown any yourself. Especially if you're never shown any yourself. Rein in your temper. Understand that other people will never understand what you are, despite you being right there in front of them. Don't get frustrated about your lack of progress. Or about anything. Easier said than done, but adopt it as a working credo and see where it leads. Look after your parents. They will be gone

sooner than you know. Drink plenty of water. Get early nights. Whatever happens, don't take any advice from anyone. You are Alone Forever.

To hell with life and everyone in it!

*Alvaro De Campos*